

SUNDAY/SABBATH
GOD'S GIFT TO YOU
Mark 2:23-3:6
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I remember clearly the time when the closest thing
to hell itself was a hot summer Sunday afternoon -
particularly if you happened to be a boy of ten. | The rules
were unwritten, but omnipresent nevertheless. | Blessed with
parents who were more human than pious, I was only partially
a victim of Sabbath ~~Sunday~~ oppression. | In my case prohibition
seemed to be related to the vigor of a particular activity,
or the perspiration it generated. | Riding a bicycle was
allowed, playing basketball was not. | The best Sunday
approved by all activity, of course, was reading. | Mostly, however, I was a
horrified - if somewhat curious - observer. | I suppose it
didn't hurt them, but I do recall the ones who remained in
their Sunday clothes throughout the hot afternoon, sitting
on the porch, forbidden to play even monopoly. | I recall the signal
we had to indicate that their parents had dozed and that
it was safe for me to bring them the comics from our Sunday
paper - the only color in their drab Sabbath.

From the time I first thought about it I never could
bring myself to believe that God cared much one way or
the other about the way his people spent their Sunday
afternoons. | A Harmless idiosyncrasy, it has always seemed.
And yet the topic represents a venerable tradition and, in
a very real sense, it does contain provocation and conflicting

expression of religious conviction.

The whole topic is full of both humor and tragedy.
On March 13, 1842 the first ^{Sunday} train ran from Glasgow to Edinburgh. | The Presbytery of Glasgow ("denounced the running of Sunday trains as a flagrant violation of the law of God ~~as expressed in the Fourth Commandment~~, a grievous outrage on the religious feelings of the people of Scotland, a powerful temptation to the careless and indifferent ~~to abandon the public ordinances of Grace~~ ^(for good measure) and most disastrous to the quiet of the rural parishes along the line, by the introduction into them every Sabbath of many of the profligate and dissipated who inhabit the cities of Glasgow and Edinburgh". | In Edinburgh a delegation of ministers lined the platform and ("informed the detraining passengers that they had bought tickets to hell".) (Maurice Lindsay, A Portrait of Glasgow, cited by William Barclay, The Ten Commandments for Today, p.37-38).

That's the silly part. | The tragedy is in the report of Peter MacKenzie regarding an Irish family on the streets of Glasgow, on a snowy night in 1847. | "one child out of seven dead, | the mother herself dying of consumption, | victims of a church ruling that soup kitchens for the destitute were not to be opened on the Sabbath for fear of offending the Lord." (Ibid. p.38).

How in the world can Christian people start with the compassion of Jesus Christ and somehow end up with a child dying of hunger because it happens to be Sunday night? What connection is there between the Lord who seemed to enjoy the company of little children and the sad scenario of youngsters sitting in their best clothes, grimly sweltering on a hot afternoon?

Obviously my conclusion is that there is no connection at all. And yet ^{the underlying here} ~~that~~ dynamic continues to show itself in life. The very best intentions, the noblest ideas, seem to go awry, after they have been institutionalized for very long. ^{In} any event, how we got from there to here is a story worth knowing, I think.

The idea of a Sabbath was purely Jewish. ~~They invented it.~~ The Babylonians devised a seven day week; the Romans assigned each day to a deity; the current names of the days come from the names of Scandanavian gods - Wednesday from Woden, Thursday from Thor, for instance.

The idea of one day out of seven assigned for rest; the idea that the pattern is part of the nature of things from the creation itself; the notion that observing a Sabbath is vital to the health and well-being of the people - that is pure Judaism, and - I would add - pure genius. But over the centuries, particularly in times of intense piety and

penitence, the ~~ancient~~ Jews turned their laws inward,
studying them, interpreting them and inevitably expanding
them. Nowhere was that process so thorough as in the area
of Sabbath observances.

Let me illustrate. The ^{Commandment} ~~commanded~~ ~~and~~ forbade work.
But what is work? The expanded law identified thirty-nine
different categories, and each one was subdivided many times.
One category was carrying a burden. But what is a burden?
Is a child a burden? No - but if the child has a stone in
his hand he or she is a burden. But what, exactly, is the
definition of a stone?" (See Barclay, p.27).

The earliest Christians were Jews and it never occurred
to them not to observe the Sabbath. And yet, from the very
earliest days Christian people have been drawn to the first
day of the week, the day of Resurrection, the day ^{formerly} ~~formally~~
assigned to the Sun god. They called it - after Easter -
The Lord's Day. It was their special day, the day on which
they gathered to worship. By the end of the second century
the idea of a Sabbath had simply disappeared from the
Christian Church. Early theologians, in fact, advised
Christians to avoid Sabbath observance. The Lord's Day was for
worship - otherwise it was an ordinary day, full of ordinary
activity. like a Monday for us - with prayers in the
morning + worship in evening.

But when the Roman Emperor Constantine became a Christian,
by edict he made the Lord's Day a kind of holiday. Work was

a new + dramatic idea.

outlawed - only in the cities. Constantine was not subtle at all. Christian soldiers were given Sunday off. Non-Christian soldiers spent the day parading and memorizing Christian prayers in case they might wish to reconsider.

Constantine started something which has never stopped. In 735 a theologian named Alciun came to the radical conclusion that the Lord's Day was a kind of Sabbath. Thomas Aquinas, in the 13th century took the idea to its limits by teaching that the Sabbath is changed into the Lord's Day. And shortly thereafter the Christian Church had as many rules as the first century Scribes and Pharisees.

The Reformers tried to reverse the process both Calvin and Luther disavowed the identification of Sabbath with Sunday. But, they failed. In fact, the idea was a favorite of the Puritans. ~~it was observing the sabbath was their special~~ pastime. When they came to power in England under Cromwell William Barclay writes that "They ordered every Maypole in England cut down, turned Christmas into a penitential fast and enacted a series of ~~seven~~ Sunday observance laws including some which forbade all vain and profane walking on the Sabbath'." (Ibid, p.36).

They called their clergy together at Westminster and wrote a monumental confession of Reformed Presbyterian Faith. And they included in it their curious and unbiblical obsession with the Sabbath.

Public justification -
to me ever
bright of
+ before.

That's how Sunday became a Sabbath -
that's why little boys used to sit with long pants,
white shirt + tie on Sat⁶ - afternoon. Now

~~Now, having put it all in historic perspective,~~ let's
go back and see what the book says. | Our text this morning
contains ^{five} ~~ten~~ brief vignettes which contrast the behavior
and teaching of Jesus with the religious law, the Sabbath
law in particular.

In the first instance Jesus and his disciples ~~were~~
caught picking grain from a field which they ~~were~~
passing. The law allowed for sojourners to help themselves when hungry.
But it ~~was~~ the Sabbath. | In fact, they ~~have broken~~ four
different Sabbath laws prohibiting, reaping, winnowing
threshing and preparing a meal. | When the Pharisees accused
him, Jesus referred them to the story in I Samuel 21 about the
time David, himself, fleeing for his life and desperately
hungry, ate the sacred bread. | Scripture, that is to say,
contains an instance where human need is more important
than religious rule. | The important point here is what Jesus
said next: ("The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the
Sabbath.") That is, the idea of a Sabbath is a good one. | It
was intended to make life better and fuller and healthier.
But somehow, things are upside down. | The Sabbath has become
sacred in and of itself. ~~Observing it has become an end~~
~~in itself.~~

The second incident is poignant. | It involves a man
with a crippled hand. | It involves a curious Sabbath
stipulation that in case of critical illness, steps may be
taken to prevent a person from dying, but not to make him or
her better. | Jesus knew the rules. | He also could have met

is bread -
not from
birth,
incident -

the man later out back and healed his hand. | The account, however, indicates that he had had enough. | He was looking for a test case and this was it. | In full view of everyone inside the Synagogue on the Sabbath, he healed the man, after he had explained in the simplest possible terms that it is always lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

It is so very easy to be critical and so very difficult for us to comprehend the seriousness with which a devout Jew took Sabbath observance, ^{It is also difficult for us to comprehend} and the ways in which the ^{underlying} dynamic exists in our own lives. | Langdon Gilkey, University of Chicago theologian, commenting on the human prospect, wrote a paragraph I recall every time I find myself sitting in a meeting and pondering the fact that what we are talking about has absolutely nothing to do with the stated purposes of the group that is meeting. | Gilkey wrote: ("As every advanced technological society has discovered human beings are not so much the masters as the servants of the organization they have created, servants in the precise sense that they find themselves caught and rendered inwardly hopeless within the system insofar as they participate in it at all.")
(Reaping the Whirlwind, p.12).

The passage in Mark, I conclude, is not just about some illy religious rules. | It is about an almost demonic human tendency to create institutions to serve humanity, to

* to spend more time maintaining the institutions than pursuing its goal,

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to invest more importance in the institution than the purpose it is supposed to be serving, sometimes to baptize the institution with sanctity and fall down to worship it. Thomas Jefferson apparently believed that the only way for a nation state to perpetuate its creative vigor was to have an occasional revolution, and to rid itself of the dead weight of the structure and bureaucracies it had accumulated. Dangerous words, those. And yet recent history is the story of Presidential despair over the simple inability of anyone to significantly budge the bureaucracy of government. It is not, by the way, confined to the Federal level. The dynamic is alive and well - in your local P.T.A., which group I abandoned in another city I hasten to add, when I discovered ^{that} its chief purpose was to earn money to send delegates to a convention to learn how to make money so that next year's delegates could go to the convention.

I think Christians - in the mold of Jesus himself, ought to be the very ones who ask the embarrassing, obnoxious questions ~~in the world~~. I think we should have learned by now that there is not a human institution anywhere, of any size, that will not become a self-perpetuating bureaucracy straying from its intent, if someone doesn't ask the questions. I believe that is true of governments, prisons, police, welfare departments, hospitals, universities, courts, armies,

of the organizations ~~institutions~~ which propel life in the world.

navies, service clubs and Little League Baseball teams.
I believe Christians ought to be the very ones who drag
their feet, call for a point of order, table the motion, or
at least guffaw whenever any institute begins to call itself
sacred. That, we should know by now, is the first step
toward idolatry and disaster. Christians, in the mold of
Jesus, should know by now that the only thing sacred in this
universe is God himself and the people in whom he has planted
his image. Causes, governments, laws, organizations, churches,
are not sacred: in this life only people are.

Christian men and women, in the mold of Jesus, ought
to know that their religion is a remembering and a celebrating
and a practicing of love, love lived out actively in the
world: that their religion has stopped being Christian
when it may be described as a list of prohibitions.

And if we can assimilate and live that, we need and
deserve a Sabbath. In its proper and original perspective
it is a rich part of our heritage. It intended to keep life
in focus: to avoid the idolatry of too much work; to season
labor with leisure. It speaks to an urgent and very
contemporary need, namely, the need for unstructured and
empty time in our lives: the need for solitude and quiet:
the need for parents and children to be together; the critical

need for husbands and wives, for the sake of their
relationship to stop doing and start being.

Without ^{any} ~~at all~~ legalism, I am convinced that we need a
renewed idea of Sabbath: that even though God may not be
offended because the stores are open, our ^{or Sunday} person's health
and well being - in which He ^{is} vitally interested - are
better served making more creative use of that time. ^{then grocery shopping} That's
the point really. Sabbath was a gift of God. Sunday can
and should be the same: a precious gift of a day which He wants us to
enjoy. ^{I found an} ~~an~~ old hymn out of another era entirely, says it
eloquently, and with a delightful Sunday eccentricity... ^{when I don't even recall singing.} ^{we would do well to recover}

This is the day of rest:

Our failing strength renew:

^{On} ~~Our~~ weary brain and troubled breast,

^{Shed} ~~Sh~~e Thou thy freshening dew.

Amen.

Help us, this day, our Father, to relax more: to slow our pace,
to live each moment for its own sake. Help us, this day,
our Father, to do those important things we have been too
busy to do all week. God, our Father, this is the day you
have made. We rejoice in it. We are glad for it. Give us
grace to enjoy it.

Amen.